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Africa - West

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CHILD LIFE IN WEST CENTRAL AFRICA. ✓

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WHEN the African child opens his eyes to the light of this world, he finds no soft garments awaiting him—only a bed of leaves or a reed mat on the earth floor, by the side of a smoking fire. After an excuse for a bath, his tiny mouth is filled and refilled with corn meal gruel, made with sweet beer. And this is continued till he is old enough to eat mush. Sometimes, when a little one's skull is soft and open, a plaster made of red clay, charcoal, oil and hen's feathers is stuck on the top of the cranium, where it remains till the hair grows and lifts it up.

The child is not supposed to wear any clothing till three or four years of age, and then a half yard is quite sufficient. When the baby is two or three days old it is tied on the back of its mother or some child, the little legs spread apart so the feet will reach around the hips, and with a cloth drawn tightly over its body, its

little head is left to dangle. The face is rarely ever washed and the flies fill its mouth and eyes. And often the whole body is covered with filthy sores. All weakly children die early. Indeed it is a source of wonderment to us that one ever recovers from a fit of sickness.

As a rule children are not abused. They have enough to eat (except in cases of discipline—which are rare—when food is withheld as a punishment) and are allowed to do much as they please, and wallow in the dirt with the pigs and chickens. But sometimes if a mother dies and her little ones have no older sister or aunts, they suffer with hunger and are cuffed and scolded by the other wives of their father.

As soon as a girl is old enough to be useful, her life-work begins, i. e. carrying a basket on her head and a baby on her back. Their chief amusements are imitating their mother's work. They pound up dirt instead of corn, make clay pots and tie an ear of corn on the back instead of a doll. The boys make pop-guns, bows and arrows, and spend much time fishing and hunting. They play several games not unlike those played by school children in my day.

So far, you do not think their lives can



A CHRISTIAN HOME AND FAMILY.
WEST CENTRAL AFRICA.

be very dark, do you? But thus far you have seen only the fairest side of it. What is the other side?

Utterly void of everything good and pure. They are not only from the earliest age taught to lie and steal, but mothers and grandmothers teach their little boys practices too vile to mention. Their little hearts are ruled by fear, not love. If they hear a bird cry at night, they believe it an evil spirit. If they are ill, some one has bewitched them. They dare not go out in the woods alone for fear some one will catch them. If the father becomes angry, his first act is to threaten to shoot them, and they must keep in hiding till his anger has cooled off.

Their father has no more claim or control over them than any stranger. They are subject to the caprice of their mother's brothers who may sell them for a debt at any time. No matter what cruel deed is being done, nothing is kept from the children. They see and hear things which you, my friends, never dreamed of.

When a little boy is ten years old—old enough to carry a load—his real hardships begin. He must accompany his master or relatives on long journeys, carrying his meals, tramping through the hot

sun day after day, sleeping out of doors in the cold and wet. When his little legs become stiff and swollen and refuse to carry him farther, nine chances out of ten he is knocked in the head and left for the hyenas to devour.

The girl must have her body tattooed in various designs—a most painful operation. The skin is pricked with needles and the juice of an herb injected, which leaves raised sears. Her chief education is that she must marry and bear children. Little girls of eight and ten years are often engaged to old men, but seldom are married younger than sixteen or seventeen. Young men rarely marry younger than twenty.

One of the saddest things about child-life here is that there is nothing in prospect for the child but to grow to be what his father and his grand-father were before him. And Oh! the anxiety we feel to get hold of these little ones and teach them better things before their hearts become hardened in sin. Our work is more directly with and for the young. Circumstances have made it so in a measure, though we do all we can for the older people. But if you could realize the different lives the children of our Christians live—the different atmosphere they are

brought up in! And those who live at the villages are wise in bringing their little folks to the mission compound to stay while their mothers are absent in the fields.

This little anecdote will speak for itself.

Our Cato has a little daughter four years old—very shy and quiet. One day her mother asked her, “Rebecca, where is Jesus?”

“In Heaven.”

“And who is with Him there?”

“May; and May is all beautiful, beautiful.” (May is my little lamb, safe in the upper fold.)

“Do you wish to go and live with May?”

“I can’t, for I have sins. Dora (her baby sister) has no sin for she is a baby, but I am older and I have sins.”

“Where are your sins,” asked her mother.

“In my heart.” “Have I sins?” again she asked, “O yes, and so has father.”

Her mother said in repeating the conversation to me, “Where did she learn all that? I have never taught her—such a child!”

I told the mother she must understand that *now* is the time to teach her the

truths—that the Catholics say “Give me a child till seven years of age, and you may have him afterwards.” Rebecca says little, but she hears and understands much more than her elders realize. How you would enjoy hearing these little tots sing! It is worth living in Africa just to feel that in these children is dawning a new era. May God own and bless His work!

They are coming from the dark Soudan
That lies by the Niger's shore,
And the glory of the Son of man
O'er its hills and plains shall pour.
Land of deepest, darkest heathen night,
Thou shalt yet be called the Land of Light,
And in that Millennial morn so bright,
Africa's sons at last shall weep no more.

—Selected.

All the ends of the world shall remember and
turn unto the Lord: and all the kindreds of the
nations shall worship before thee.

—Psalms xxii. 27.

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